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# The Experience of Foster Parents: What Keeps Foster Parents Motivated to Foster Long Term?

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THE EXPERIENCE OF FOSTER PARENTS:  
WHAT KEEPS FOSTER PARENTS MOTIVATED TO FOSTER LONG TERM?

A dissertation presented to the faculty of  
ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY SANTA BARBARA

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY  
in  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

By

Rodrigo Diaz, MA  
**July 2017**

THE EXPERIENCE OF FOSTER PARENTS:  
WHAT KEEPS FOSTER PARENTS MOTIVATED  
TO FOSTER LONG TERM?

This dissertation, by Rodrigo Diaz, MA, has been approved by the committee members signed below who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of Antioch University Santa Barbara in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## **Abstract**

The number of children entering foster care has increased significantly in recent years, leading some to categorize the foster system as being in a state of crisis. More foster parents are needed, as are better retention methods. It is pertinent to understand the experiences that foster parents have that affect their decision to continue or cease fostering. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the needs of foster parents based on their experiences and perceptions. The overarching research question sought to determine the lived experiences of foster parents who were navigating through, or taking part in, the foster system. Seven foster parents living in California, who had been fostering for at least six months and who had had a child in their home participated in the study. Data was collected via one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions. Responses were analyzed and revealed four themes: 1) parents decide to foster for a variety of reasons, the most common being altruistic purposes and the awareness of the need for good foster parents; 2) parents find fostering to be a life-enhancing experience; 3) fostering involves significant challenges, the most common being handling a child who had been through traumatic experiences prior to being in the foster care system; and 4) parents felt strongly motivated to continue fostering. The findings from the current study aligned with previous literature regarding the overall positive feelings associated with fostering, and the descriptions of challenges faced by foster parents. The experience of being a foster parent could be improved if the foster care system underwent internal changes to lighten the burden for social workers so they can better respond to foster parents. This Dissertation is available in Open Access at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, <http://aura.antioch.edu> and OhioLink ETD Center, <http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd>

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## Table of Contents

<b>Title Page</b> .....	i
<b>Signature Page</b> .....	ii
<b>Copyright Page</b> .....	iii
<b>Abstract</b> .....	iv
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	v
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	vi
 <b>Chapter I: Introduction</b> .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	1
Definition of Terms.....	3
Research Question.....	4
Interview Questions.....	4
Researcher's Bias .....	5
Purpose of the Study .....	5
Significance of the Proposed Study to Clinical Psychology .....	6
Collection of data .....	6
Conclusion.....	7
 <b>Chapter II: Review of Literature</b> .....	8
Introduction .....	8
United States Foster Care System Trends .....	9
History of Foster Parenting .....	12
Kinship Care.....	15
The Foster Care System in the United States of America.....	25
Specific Complexities by the United States Foster Care System.....	26
Motivation for Foster Parents.....	30
Importance of Foster Parents on Foster Children Development.....	31
Challenges Faced by Foster Parents in terms of providing Safety, Wellbeing and Permanency to Foster Children .....	32
Attachment and Identity of Foster Children and Foster Parents .....	39
Summary and Literature Gap .....	43
 <b>Chapter III: Methodology</b> .....	46
Introduction .....	46
Research Sample .....	46
Information Needed.....	48
Research Design Overview .....	50
Method of Procedure.....	51
Data Collection.....	52
Research Instrument.....	53
Data Analysis and Synthesis .....	54

Ethical Considerations.....	55
Limitations and Delimitations.....	56
Potential Harm to Participants.....	57
Summary .....	58
<b>Chapter IV: Results</b> .....	59
Demographics of the Participants .....	59
Participants' Experiences of Being a Foster Parent .....	61
Theme 1: Parents Decide to Foster for a Variety of Reasons .....	62
Theme 2: Parents Find Fostering to Be a Life-Enhancing Experience .....	64
Theme 3: Fostering Involves Significant Challenges .....	65
Theme 4: Parents Felt Strongly Motivated to Continue Fostering.....	67
<b>Chapter V: The Experience of Foster Parents</b> .....	69
Results and Implications .....	69
Reasons for Becoming a Foster Parent .....	70
Fostering as a Life-Enhancing Experience.....	71
Challenges Faced by Foster Parents.....	71
Motivation to Continue Fostering .....	72
Limitations .....	72
Conclusion.....	74
<b>References</b> .....	78
APPENDIX A Cover Letter.....	100
APPENDIX B Informed Consent Form .....	101
APPENDIX C Interview Questions.....	102
APPENDIX D: Demographics Questioner .....	103



## **Chapter I: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

The number of foster children entering foster care has increased significantly over the past few years, leading some to categorize the foster system as being in a state of crisis (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013; Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, Trogh, & Andries, 2012). Although the name used and its specific roles and processes vary across states, the foster system generally refers to any government system that serves as a safety net for minority-age children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned (Foster, 2001). While the number of foster children entering the system increases, the number of foster parents does not. In fact, only 21% of foster parents, foster long term, while the remaining number foster on average of 8 to 14 months (Cherry & Orme, 2013; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007).

These numbers force the few foster parents to take in the majority of the foster children. To compensate the need for foster parents foster agencies have looked into other ways of providing care for the children who are removed from the home. For example, in Ventura County the first option of placement is kin care (Webber, 2013). A person who provides kin care is someone who was already involved in the child's life before the child was removed from the home but not a licensed care provider. In many cases the kin care provider is a grandparent, an aunt, a close family friend, or another extended family member the biological parent chooses. In many of these environments the kin care providers are less educated, have lower income, poor living conditions, have more children to care for, and are at higher risk of health problems (Daly & Perry, 2011). In other instances, the county agency will contract other non-profit agencies that have certified foster parents; these agencies typically have higher

monetary compensation for foster parents. As a last resort, when no other family homes are available, foster children are placed in group homes that are intended for children with more intense needs (Webber, 2013).

Foster parents have been faced with many challenges over the years. In more recent times the challenges foster parents face have become more complex (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2005). Foster children are presenting with aggression and sexualized behaviors at young ages. Others are delinquent and struggle with emotional disturbance. Many have special learning needs, developmental delays, and disabilities. Finally, more and more foster children are presenting with substance use and addiction as early as in-utero. Another challenge presented to foster parents is the increased demand to interact with the foster child's family of origin. Many foster parents feel insecure meeting the families of origin due to fear. Foster children are removed from their home for a number of reasons, for instance having a caretaker who has broken the law can be the case, making it uncomfortable for foster parents to interact with potential criminals. Brown and Bednar (2006) noted that foster parents were more likely to discontinue fostering when they felt that their family is in danger. Having the foster parents meet with the foster child's family could be perceived as a dangerous situation.

Historically women have been the main providers for foster children. A challenge the foster system is facing is the increased demand of having two income households and women entering the work force (Barber, 2001). With women becoming unavailable, fewer families are able to foster. Providing for a child is expensive and the recent economic downfall has forced budget cuts for the foster system (Daly & Perry, 2011). Fostering provides a monetary compensation, but not enough to cover the expenses required to support a child (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz,

2013). The authors found that foster parents were very worried about the frequent cuts in financial support for foster children as the funding is already far too little to support a child on, let alone one with special needs due to maltreatment. Furthermore, if foster parents are employed outside the home they are responsible for the cost of childcare. Taking all of these factors in to consideration, fostering can easily become a financial burden for foster parents.

Needless to say, more foster parents are needed and better retention methods need to be in place to keep foster parents long term. It is pertinent to understand the experiences that foster parents had that persuaded them to make the decision to continue to foster or to cancel their license. Being able to retain foster parents could alleviate some of the pressures on other agencies such as juvenile detention facilities or group home facilities. It would also help eliminate the number of times a foster child is moved from one home to another— as these moves can be traumatic, the aim is to provide a stable home environment to foster children. The Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) emphasizes amongst others, a continuum of placement options and decision-making that is grounded in the principle that every child has the right to feel safe and loved in a stable environment (Brown, Dooley, & Lightbourne 2015). Foster parents play an important role in the community and the research would greatly benefit numerous groups.

### **Definition of Terms.**

**Foster care.** “Foster care is a living arrangement for children who a child protective services worker or a court has decided cannot live safely at home. Foster care arrangements include non-relative foster homes, relative foster homes (also known as “kinship care”), group homes, institutions, and pre-adoptive homes.” (Child Trends Databank, 2015, p. 7). According to AFCARS (2015) foster care

is a temporary placement solution and the goal is to provide a permanent solution to every child in the system. While foster care is the term that is used in this research, other entities may use different names for similar responsibilities, i.e. resource families.

**Nonrelative foster care.** This is the most common type of foster care and refers to a placement option of children with parents “who are licensed by a local child welfare authority to provide care for the wards of state.”(Frost, 2014, p. 2074).

**Kinship care.** Another name for this kind of care is relative foster care as it refers to a placement option where children who were removed from their family homes reside with adults who are “related to the child through marriage, adoption, with some variations across states in the definition of kin.” (Frost, 2014, p. 2074).

### **Research Question**

Given the fact that the need for foster parents continue to increase due to the growing number of foster children entering the system each year, it is important to explore the variables that contribute to the decisions foster parents are making about continuing to foster and recruiting new foster parents. This phenomenological study is guided by one research question and three interview questions that focus on lived experiences of foster parents. The overarching research question is: What are the lived experiences of foster parents who are navigating through, or taking part in, the foster system?

### **Interview Questions**

Three interview questions will ask: (1) Would you describe your personal experiences that may have influenced your decision to foster children; (2) In your own words, what is the most meaningful experience, if any, in fostering children?;

and (3) How would you describe your most significant challenges when fostering children?

### **Researcher's Bias**

The researcher may have a bias of opinion with regards to the needs of foster parents in navigating through the foster care system because the researcher anticipates that the participants will indicate a need for increased collaboration and support between foster parents and social workers. In order to protect the reliability of the findings and the study as a whole, the researcher will keep these biases in check by ensuring that the interviews are conducted without prejudice towards eliciting responses that align with said biases. The researcher will ensure that none of the participants, their family or friends is known to the researcher to avoid any bias due to familiarity. The interview questions will be open-ended and phrased in such a way that the participants would respond based on their own experiences and perceptions, and not influenced by the researcher's personal beliefs or expectations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study will be to understand the additional needs of foster parents based on their experiences and perceptions so that these concerns may be forwarded to the county or state agency responsible for overseeing the local foster care system. As the foster care system grows with the increase in the number of foster children, officers and social workers in the foster care agency would need to modify and adjust the system's policies, protocols, budget, and resources in order to keep up with the needs of the children. Understanding the assistance and support needs of foster parents would allow officers and social workers to better comprehend and appreciate the tasks and responsibilities of foster parents, and subsequently determine ways through which they can address these needs so that more children are

provided the foster care that they need by recruiting and retaining suitable foster parents.

### **Significance of the Proposed Study to Clinical Psychology**

The numbers clearly indicate the importance of having more foster homes in the community. However, much of the available research on the foster system focus on the experience of foster children while they are in foster care, but few mentioned the foster parents' perspective (Anderson, 2001; Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; Geiger et al., 2013). Exploring the lived experience of foster parents could give social service agencies a much deeper and broader understanding of the unique long term psychological and emotional needs of foster parents and possibly aid in designing foster programs that promote long term retention.

Moreover, this research would greatly benefit foster children who find themselves in group homes or other facilities when there are not enough foster homes to take in children. The results of this study could subsequently help social workers and foster parents better care for foster children, the latter would have less difficulty adjusting to their new dwellings. Eventually, this stable home environment may help foster children perform better in school and other activities. Other organizations that could benefit from the research would be juvenile detention facilities that sometimes hold delinquent youth who are unable to be in a stable home. Finally, the findings could instill a deeper compassion and understanding for the work that foster parents do.

### **Collection of data**

The interviews with foster parent participants will be recorded with a digital recording device. Notes will also be taken and later transcribed by the interviewer. All information will be kept in a locked file and numbers will be assigned to

participants to maintain confidentiality. All participants will be given informed consent forms to fill out and sign, and will be notified that should they wish to end the interview at any time there will be no repercussion. Participants should know that participating in the study is not a requirement for foster parents of the county.

### **Conclusion**

There is a dire need for suitable foster parents who are willing to continue fostering children after the initial placement is terminated, either due to reuniting with biological parents or adoption. Recruiting, training, and retaining suitable foster parents is a long and difficult task, one that is ongoing seeing that there can be up to 450,000 foster children per day in the foster care system. It is therefore essential to understand which factors contribute to foster parents' decision to remain in the system as well as leaving the system to effectively address the situation. The goal of providing long-term placement for children in foster care is hard and it is made even harder when foster parents decide not to continue with fostering children.

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

### **Introduction**

The literature review will include studies on trends (Fisher, Stoolmiller, Mannering, Takakashi & Chamberlain, 2011; McCoy-Roth et al., 2011; Rubin et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2011), history of foster care parenting (Daly & Schoenfelder, 2011; O'Connor, 2004), kinship care (Blakey, 2012; Cuddeback, 2004; Daly & Schoenfelder, 2011; Font, 2014; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013; Koh & Testa, 2008; Messing, 2005; Metzger, 2008; O'Brien, 2012; Scannapieco & Hegar, 2002), and Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC), which reveals the problems of foster care, especially for the problems of foster parents due to lack of support. It is vital to understand the history and current trends in foster care as this will provide the background for the study. It is furthermore important to distinguish between kinship care and foster care, and to identify the advantages and disadvantages of kinship care, as kinship care has become increasingly popular in recent years. The motivation behind foster parenting is discussed followed by the importance of foster parents on foster children development. This review of literature provides an overview of the challenges currently faced by the foster system, as well as the solutions and adjustments that have been made to address older issues. This knowledge will inform the data gathering and analysis as it provides the researcher a clear context within which to place the research.

The key search terms and combination of search terms that were input to various online databases included the following: foster parents, foster children, foster homes, kinship care, group homes, and adoption. All the key terms used were able to yield



studies that were relevant to the problem and research questions. Most of the literature included was that published between 2013 and 2016, to ensure that the latest findings and reports were included in the review. However, literature on the experiences of foster parents is limited. In order to expand the results, older articles that were pertinent to the topic were included.

### **United States Foster Care System Trends**

Foster care system is a temporary home for the children who are neglected or abused at their home of origin (Haugaard & Hazan, 2013). The child welfare institutions aim to find a permanent home for the children who are located in the foster care system. These children are either reunited with their biological parents or they are accommodated with guardians or relatives. In addition, in some instances children are adopted from the foster care system. Agrys and Duncan (2013) stated that in the late 1970s, only about 25% of children in foster care who were eligible for adoption were being adopted within two years. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 led to increases in adoption subsidies and resulted in increased adoption rates. As foster parents have to weigh adoption benefits for both the child and family against a larger financial burden adoption was previously not as feasible. In 2010, most of the children entering the foster care system were permanently accommodated which is the ideal situation as the children need stability together with love and care.

If too many children are placed with a single foster family, parents will encounter greater difficulties managing the household; thus, this issue needs to be addressed. Nearly half of the over 400,540 children in foster care reside in nonrelative foster care homes, however during 2012, 600,000 children were accommodated in foster care homes

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013; Geiger, Hayes & Lietz, 2013).

The need for foster parents in the United States is significant as on any given day there are around 415,000 children in the foster care system and in 2014 alone more than 650,000 had to be accommodated in the U.S. foster care system (Administration for Children and Families 2015; AFCARS Report, 2015). In 2014 29,000 children were placed in kinship care, 46,000 in nonrelative foster care, 6,000 in group homes, and 8,000 in institutions. The rest of the children were either placed in a temporary housing facility while awaiting more permanent placement or alternative arrangements were made for them (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). These statistics provide a view of how many foster parents must be permanently available in the different placement options that the system provides to adequately care for the traumatized and vulnerable foster children.

**Placement options.** Children entering foster care systems are placed in a variety of temporary homes including, foster homes, relative care or kinship care, intensive treatment foster care, institutions, and group homes. In the year 2010, out of the total children who were placed in different temporary settlements, 48 percent were placed in nonrelative foster families whereas, 26 percent were placed in relative foster family homes (USDHHS, 2011). Compared to the 2014 statistics the number of children in foster care remained fairly stable as was the need for foster parents (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). The average duration of stay is one to five years, the highest duration of stay in foster care is between two and three years where after more permanent living arrangements are made (Administration for Children and Families, 2015).

Children who were removed from their family homes faced complex trauma, child welfare services therefore need to plan placements carefully as moving the child

repeatedly result in further trauma to the child. The placement of the children had an influential impact on the behavior of children (Fisher et al., 2011). If children are constantly sent to trial homes, they have to make continuous adjustments in their behavior according to the requirement of their current home (Fraser et al. 2014). These adjustments can have a number of negative effects on the behavior of the children such as becoming insecure or violent (Children's Bureau, 2012). With increasing numbers of children entering the system in recent years, more children were placed under kinship care (Children's Bureau, 2012).

**Children older than 18 years.** Young adults beyond 18 years of age display the desire to become independent and are also more capable of caring for themselves (Kagiticbasi, 2013). In the case of non-foster children, these young adults still enjoy the protection and assistance of their parents. Children growing older than 18 years have to leave the foster care system without having any safe and permanent home (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson, & Courtney, 2015; McCoy-Roth, DeVoogh & Fletcher, 2011). There was a sharp climb in the number of youth aging out of the foster care system from 1998 to 2007 (McCoy-Roth et al., 2011). According to Greeson et al. (2015) approximately 20,000 young adults age out of the foster care system per year. There were researchers who reported positively on this group of children who suddenly find themselves without a safe home, occupation, and support system (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). However, Greeson et al. (2015) indicated that the negative results of aging out of the system far outweigh the positives. This group was found to be at risk of criminal activities, substance abuse, and unemployment as they did not yet had the

opportunity to embark on further study to acquire a degree or further (Greeson et al., 2015), clearly this group needs further support.

The state of California instituted a Life Skills program, similar to other states, but added extended caring contact in the form of short term case management services (Greeson et al., 2015). The nature of the extended services is similar to what the children received during their foster care period focusing on the youth's preparation to emancipate out of the foster care system in Los Angeles County. In synchrony with the training sessions assessment on the youth's ability to transition to independent living is performed, upon completion it is discussed with and signed by the individual children (Greeson et al., 2015). If needed an individual can be referred for additional support and counselling. Greeson et al.'s (2015) study showed that the youth became less dependent on the social services over time. In fact, the young people who were employed outgrew the need for social support at a much faster rate compared to the unemployed peers (Greeson et al., 2015). Should such training take place during the last months of the child's stay at the foster parents they could provide the needed support and experience closure with the knowledge that the child had been equipped with the necessary skills before leaving home.

### **History of Foster Parenting**

The demand for foster parents has had a steady increase since the early 20th century (Daly & Perry, 2011). Initially, foster care was solely for abandoned children. Charles Loring Brace began the movement in 1853 out of concern for the children living in the streets of New York City (O'Connor, 2004). Initially, Brace advertised in the South and the West to find homes that were willing to take in these children for free. The

children would then be put on trains and taken to the town where they would then meet their new family. Often children would be separated from their siblings when families were unable or unwilling to take in more than one child. In the early 1900s, foster parents began to see more regulations around taking in children. Agencies started inspecting homes, keeping records, and considering children's needs when placing them in foster homes.

In more recent years, children who suffer physical abuse or emotional abuse in their homes are removed and put into foster care. The 1995 guidelines of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) recommend that custody placement be made within 48 hours and the first hearings to occur within three days. Timely hearings are important to achieve a sense of permanency in the already disrupted lives of foster children (Beal, Wingrove, & Weisz, 2014). Some foster children are removed because the agencies have declared the parents unable to care for their own child. While others are removed due to neglectful parenting, most often parents are substance abusers. Simmons, and Danker-Feldman (2014) scrutinized documents from child welfare and the judicial/corrective systems between 1997-2007. They found a conspicuous absence of parents from court hearings where their children were detained or their parental rights were ended. The mothers were mostly the primary caretakers of which approximately 70% had criminal records and 54% were imprisoned, moreover, a staggering 87% were found guilty of substance abuse. According to Pimentel (2014) the definition of child abuse was adjusted by Congress since 1989 version caused over-identification of unfit to care and thus overburdened the foster care system. The current definition quoted by Pimentel (2014) reads:

any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm. (p245)

While child removal is lawful in every state and some states also allow emergency removals without a warrant it is disturbing to note that child removals rose with 30% between 2003 and 2008. An even more disturbing fact is that 41% of the children who were removed, were found not to be maltreated at all (Pimentel, 2014). Over-caution on the side of Child Protection services may also cause harm to children.

Until the 1970s, the child welfare system functioned with the belief that when a child was removed from the home it was best to place them in an environment that was outside their biological family (Daly & Perry, 2011). It was thought that if the child was not safe with their parents then they were not going to be safe with any other member of the family.

As the demand for foster parents became greater, the requirements became less restrictive eventually allowing single, unmarried, and most recently same-sex couples to be foster parents. Due to children entering the system with complex conditions, some agencies are now leaning towards the professionalism of foster parents. The concept of a professional foster carer or parent implies that such persons would be required to undergo training and education, would be subject to certain standards and qualifications, and would be eligible to receive fees and allowances based on their levels of qualification and experience (Schofield, Beek, Ward, & Biggart, 2013). This change provides more education for the parents in order to deal with aggression, sexual behaviors, delinquency,

learning needs, developmental delays, medically fragile children, and other conditions (Daly & Perry, 2011).

### **Kinship Care**

Over the last 25 years, child welfare systems have begun the use of kinship care as the method of choice in caring for children who need to be removed from their immediate families. Sometimes the children are placed with family members who are not in good health, are living in extreme poverty, or live in undesirable neighborhoods (Daly & Perry, 2011). The idea being that the children would do better in environments with which they were already familiar, even when the environment was not ideal. Agencies thought that placing children in kin care would minimize the trauma of separating a child from their family. On a positive note, it has been found that family members provide more continuity and familiarity that softens the removal from parental care. Family members pay more special attention to the foster children since they are family and kinship care tend to be more stable compared to foster care (Daly & Perry, 2011; Font, 2015; Lin, 2014; Szilagyi, 2014).

Daly and Perry (2011) argued that children would not be better off when they are placed in kin care when kin care is often far from an ideal placement. Multiple studies have indicated that people who provide kin care are typically less educated, have lower income, poor living conditions, have more children to care for, and are at higher risk of health problems. Kin care families tend to have lower levels of reported abuse, kinship families are monitored less, and are held to lower standards than foster families (Kiralý & Humphreys, 2013; O'Brien, 2012). In spite of the needs, kin care families typically received less support and resources than did foster care families (O'Brien, 2012). The

option for kin care has become popular among agencies due to the lesser financial obligation as compared to that required for non-relative foster guardians. However, Blakey (2012) pointed out that placing children in kin care reduce the likelihood of reunification with the parents. Children placed in non-relative foster care homes often report greater happiness and less stress (Daly & Perry, 2011). Daly and Perry (2011) believe that the decision to place children in kin care is driven by the reduced cost rather than for the benefit to the child, and some individuals or parents may not be suited nor adequately prepared to enter into kin care.

The Californian Child Welfare Services implemented a program more than ten year ago that implemented changes in funding to decrease the possibility of children living in foster care (Brown et al., 2015). The program started off by investing more in programs for children living in permanent circumstances—kinship homes, guardians, and adoptions—that led to decreased numbers of children ending up in foster care. Through prevention and early intervention initiatives the number of children in foster care was further reduced and the Title IV-E Waiver project was initiated. This project allows for re-allocating funding that would be spent on foster care to be used for increased investments in services focused on preventing children to enter foster care (Brown et al., 2015).

**Family network.** Kiraly and Humphreys (2013) had the opposite opinion. They believed that placing children in kin care strengthens their family network. This allowed children to continue close contact with siblings, parents, and other members of their biological family which children reported as very satisfying (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013; O'Brien, 2012). Additionally, placing children in kin care maintained a child's cultural



identity. Jayasekera (2006) supported this point by arguing that children placed in kin care had reduced problems with behavioral development, mental health, and placement stability. O'Brien (2012) noted that kin care providers usually tolerated behavioral issues and mental health problems better than foster parents. When given the opportunity, children chose to live with family members if they could stay with their siblings (Messing, 2005). Herring, Shook, Goodkind, and Kim (2009) speculated that children in kin care would be treated better by family members than those placed in non-relative foster care. Berrick et al. (1998) suggested that children in kin care often stay in the same home for longer than children sent to foster homes. The children in kin care are also able to build stronger bonds with their care taker than those in foster care (Dubowitz, 1993).

There are several advantages to placing children in kinship foster homes. According to an early study of the phenomenon, placing kids in kinship foster home can save the state and federal government a lot of money compared to non-kinship foster care.

**Benefits of kinship care.** Kinship placements have become a widely popular practice across cultures because of its benefits. Kinship placements can be formal or informal. Informal kinship care or private kinship care takes place when there is an emergency within a family. It is called a private arrangement, because the parents voluntarily place the children with their kin even without judicial authority allowing them to do so due to the crisis situation. On the other hand, formal kinship care refers to kinship foster care, a type of care that has judiciary authority to happen (Ayala-Quillen, 1998). According to Vericker, Macomber and Geen (2008), kinship care has become the placement of choice among the different forms of out-of-home care in the United States.

Children in kinship placements were less likely to be traumatized emotionally with their past and backgrounds than children in non-kinship placement settings (Cuddeback, 2004). Metzger (2008) investigated and compared the effects of foster care settings on the emotional and behavioral functioning of children in kinship care and children in non-kinship care. The research found that more parents are visiting the children in kinship care and possibly because of this, they are better adjusted in their current situation and less bothered by their pasts. Mothers of children placed in foster care often are alcoholics or engaged in different forms of substance abuse, they none the less tend to visit their children more in kinship placements so the children are less likely to be traumatized with their circumstances (Metzger, 2008). Such visits from biological parents have been shown to lessen the trauma experienced by children in foster care (Cuddeback, 2004). Parental visitation is perceived as an important aspect influencing children's self-concept (Metzger, 2008). According to Koh and Testa (2008), kinship placement is sometimes viewed as beneficial, because it prevents children from experiencing the difficulties often faced by those placed in non-kinship care, especially identity problems, because of being separated from relatives. Moreover, children placed in kinship care also avoid the problems of instability in placement and the dilemmas suffered by children who grew out of the foster care system and are at a loss in a community where they do not really belong (Font, 2014; Scannapieco & Hegar, 2002).

Koh and Testa (2008) claimed that in a matched sample of 3,000 children in kinship and nonfamily foster care, children raised by a kin or under a kinship placement grow up more stable, compared to those placed in nonfamily foster homes and cared for by nonfamily foster parents. The researchers found that children in non-kinship settings

are more vulnerable to experiencing initial placement disruption and going from one foster home to another. These findings are contrary to that of Front (2015) who explored kinship care (KC) versus non-relative foster care (NRFC) and found that kinship care placements were inherently different since the child is already known to the family. Front also found that the most placement disruptions occur within the first two months of placement which are the most volatile and sensitive months in both KC and NRFC. Testa (2005) also emphasized the same and explained that high rate of stability in the growth and development of children placed with kin is linked with a sense of family duty as well as kinship altruism.

Winokur et al. (2009) claimed that having more children who stay with family and are cared for by them will mature without additional emotional difficulties, because the majority can avoid the behavioral and psychological problems experienced by children in the foster care system. They also avoid placement instability, which can negatively affect their well-being and identity (Winokur et al., 2009). According to many researchers, children in kinship have fewer behavioral and mental health issues than those in non-kinship care (Gibbs & Muller, 2000; Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005).

Rubin et al. (2008) claimed kinship care had a protective effect on children that may positively affect the behaviors of the children. Moreover, caregivers' attitudes and perceptions towards the children under their care can significantly affect the behaviors of the children. Children cared for under a kinship setting are more positively regarded compared to those being cared for by foster families. At the same time, how caregivers report the behavioral problems of the children can also affect the behavioral outcomes of the children (Rubin et al., 2008). According to Rubin and his colleagues, kinship

caregivers often view the children under their care more favorably than foster parents view their foster children. Winokur et al. (2009) claimed that overall, children who grow up with foster parents or non-kinship care were more likely to demonstrate developmental and behavioral issues.

According to Schwartz (2005), children in kinship care suffered from fewer disruptions in their development compared to those in the foster care system or with non-relatives. An earlier study by Wilson and Conroy (1999) showed that children were more likely to feel loved and cared for by their kin foster parents, and this could affect their contentment and satisfaction levels on their current lives.

Aside from experiencing fewer disruptions in their growth and development, those in kinship placements have higher self-esteem and confidence, because they are aware of their family culture (Holtan, Handegård, Thørnblad, & Vis, 2013). Because of this awareness, they are also less likely to suffer from identity dilemmas (Holtan et al., 2005). According to Keller, Wetherbee, LeProhn, Payne, Sim and Lamont (2001), among children in foster care, children in kinship care grow up better and attain better academic outcomes. This was confirmed by Brown et al. (2015) who stated in the California CCR report that children in kinship care were more likely to graduate from grade 12 compared to children in NRFC.

According Shearin (2007), many children in the foster care system grow up in an environment that makes them vulnerable to low academic success. Shearin (2007) claimed that children's perceptions of their family structure and conditions can affect how they perform in school and in general. Children placed in the kinship care environment thrive more than those in non-kinship care, perhaps because the kinship care

environment facilitates more positive and meaningful interaction between the child and the kin foster family. Positive interactions lead to children feeling more at ease at home and in the school environment. Children in non-kinship placements did not experience as much family interaction as children in kinship placements, and they lost important factors such as emotional availability, family cohesion and warmth that can affect their well-being and self-esteem (Shearin, 2007). According to Shearin, if children grew up in an environment that offers them autonomy to grow, they are in the position to have a better self-esteem and are more likely to learn. According to Schwartz (2005), children placed in kinship care experience less traumatic experiences than those in non-kinship care. As such, they possess stronger sense of belonging and less disruption in their growth. They experienced continuity in their lives, which positively affected their well-being.

Therefore, even though caseworkers are not supervising kinship placements as much as non-kinship placements, and there was a notion that kinship placements are more challenging to monitor and supervise, more caseworkers favored kinship foster care rather than non-kinship placements (Schwartz, 2005). Children placed in kinship care were also more likely to open up on their personal lives with their families than children placed in non-kinship foster care (Chapman, Wall & Barth, 2004). According to Chapman et al. (2004), children placed with their kin are more comfortable to share stories about their lives and the issues with which they were faced. Because they are more open to their foster families, they experience the benefit of adult guidance in their lives. Messing (2005) stated that transitioning from one's biological home to a foster home was less traumatic for children placed in the care of their kin compared to those who were placed with non-kin.

According to Cunneen and Libesman (2000), children placed in the foster care system often become out of sync with their cultural backgrounds as opposed to children placed in kinship care, and this affects their sense of identity. Gibbs and Muller (2000) claimed that children in kinship care have a deeper sense of identity than children who are in non-kinship care, because they have an inkling of their origins and culture. According to Schwartz (2005), children who were not placed with their kin and placed away from their family, community and even religious backgrounds can suffer from an identity crisis. They were more likely to only view themselves as a foster child (Kools, 1997). Foster children were also more likely to be affected with stigma linked to being cared for away from their biological family and this can be another reason why they devalued themselves and felt inferior (Kools, 1997). In contrast, children in kinship care are less likely to think of themselves as foster children, and will be not affected by the stigma of being a foster child. According to Messing (2005), because foster children want to be seen as normal kids, they can exhibit negative personal attitudes and lose the stigmatization of being a foster child, especially the feeling of being pitied.

According to Shin and Poertner (2002), time spent in foster care can affect their development and not all foster care children spend the same amount of time in the system. According to the USDHHS (2003), there is an increasing number of children being put into the foster care system for longer periods of times. Most of the children in the system had been in for three years or more (USDHHS, 2003). According to Shin and Poertner (2002), the longer the child was in foster care, the more they were likely to have experienced being cared for by multiple foster families. Shin and Poertner (2002) claimed that on average, children move at least five times from one foster home to another.

*Foster parents' experiences of children leaving their care.* When it is time to give up a foster child, the foster parents and family undergo a period of emotional adjustment. They experience a sense of loss and sorrow after the foster child is reunited with the biological parents, adopted, or placed in a nother foster care option (Thomson & McArthur, 2009). There is currently a large body of research on foster children while limited information on the experiences of foster parents is available. It is this gap, together with the constant need for foster parents, which motivated the researcher to address the experiences of foster parents.

**Foster children and self-identity.** Mosek and Adler (2001) claimed that children placed under kinship care did not suffer from identity problems because their self-concept was positive. The research investigated the self-concept held by adolescent girls from 12 to 18 years old cared for by relatives and those cared for by non-relatives and how this self-concept affect their well-being. The research found that girls cared for by their kin as opposed to those who were cared for by non-relatives had a better and more positive self-image, both when it comes to social relations and to their sexual lives. In addition, girls placed under kinship care were more likely to adapt quickly and effectively compared to those placed on non-kinship care.

The parent-child relationship in later life of children in non-kinship settings was more problematic (Winokur, Holtan, Batchelder & Winokur, 2014). Children in non-kinship care grew up having weak and unstable emotional ties with their foster parents and this affects their well-being and identities (Schwartz, 2005). According to Messing (2005), children in non-kinship care did not socially interact with their foster parents as well as those in kinship care. Schwartz (2005) also claimed that adolescents in non-

kinship care experience less interactions with their biological parents. Children placed in non-kinship settings were also found to be highly likely to have difficulty in establishing self-identity, because they were suffering from relationship instability (Winokur, et al., 2014)

The Norwegian researchers, Holtan, Rønning, Handegård and Sourander (2005) stated that non-kinship foster children who eventually reunite with their biological parents would more likely find themselves back in the foster care system, while the opposite was true for children in kinship placements (Holtan et al, 2005). These findings were derived from an investigation of children placed in state custody in Norway from four years old to 13 years old who were in the foster care system for a minimum of one year.

**Disadvantages of kinship care.** Even though many have preferred kinship care, it is not monitored by social workers as much as non-kinship care. Moreover, some researchers have been critical of kinship care and argued that it is not as safe as foster care that is non-kinship placement. An early study by Berrick (1997) contrasted 29 kinship placements with 33 non-kinship placements, and revealed that the children in kinship care engaged in more violent activities and drug abuse than the children in non-kinship placements.

A problem raised by Scannapieco, Hegar and McAlpine (1997) with kinship care is that most children will remain out of the care of their biological parents for longer than those placed in non-kinship or foster care. Furthermore, an early study by Testa (1997), found that children in kinship care were not as likely to reunite with their biological parents, even if they interacted more with them. In contrast, children placed in foster care



or non-kinship care reunited with their biological parents more often (Koh & Testa, 2008) and also much faster. In particular, around 25% of children in non-kinship care reunited with their biological parents, while only around 17% of children in kinship settings reunited with their real parents within three years of being placed in their respective foster care settings (Koh & Testa, 2008). These findings go against earlier speculations of Courtney and Wong (1996), who claimed that because children placed with their kin grow up in stable environments reuniting with biological parents would be more likely as they were less restricted by the foster parents.

Even though there are many benefits to kinship care, Gibbs and Muller (2000) also claimed that kinship care can be harmful to the children, because they are not protected from parental abuse while suffering from inadequate care from an unqualified kin or caregiver. Kinship caregivers are often much older than the children so generational gaps exist (Cuddeback, 2004). Researchers also revealed that kinship caregivers are less educated and have lower socioeconomic status, negatively affecting children's growth and development (Ehrle & Geen 2002; Swann & Sylvester, 2006).

According to Cuddeback (2004), more kinship caregivers were suffering from clinical depression and other detrimental health issues preventing them from delivering adequate care to the children placed with them. Compared to non-kinship caregivers, kinship caregivers were also more sedentary and engaged in lesser amounts of daily activities.

### **The Foster Care System in the United States of America**

The foster care system of the United States of America (USA) is facing a plethora of problems. First, there is an increase in the number of children that need the system, but

there is a decrease in the number of families wanting to adopt. This may be because of the lack of support being provided to foster families. Second, a large number of youth that age out of the system lack the skills required to lead a decent life. These adults do not have proper education and due to this they cannot get jobs with adequate living wages. As a result of financial disabilities, the youth is not able to get proper housing and medical facilities either. Third, the administration of the foster care system lacks stability; therefore, they cannot hire and retain highly skilled employees for the monitoring, counseling and training of foster families. Last, the children raised in the foster care system are not well developed. They often lack physical and psychological development; hence they face many problems after their transition into adulthood. These children are reluctant to form social relations and they do not have proper control over their emotions and due to these problems they usually remain emotionally stressed. The foster care system should endeavor to incorporate policies that are directed towards solving the above mentioned problems so that the future of the children in the foster care system can be secured and they can lead a successful life, even after leaving the foster care system. It is thus important to determine the support needed by foster parents from foster agencies in improving the ways they care for their foster children.

### **Specific Complexities by the United States Foster Care System**

**Problems faced by foster children.** Although it is a basic right of all children to receive a formal sustained education, it has been indicated by a number of studies that most of the youth coming out of the foster care system face significant disparities in terms of education. According to a report published by the National Association of Counties (Gardner, 2008) , youth aging out of the foster care system are two times more

likely not to have a college diploma as compared to the youth in care of their families. It was also observed that 53% of the general population living with their families, have a college diploma. In contrast, only 30% of the youth who aged out of foster care have a college diploma. The study indicated that the rate of youth completing college education was 14 percent less than that of general public (Gardner, 2008).

The above statistics clearly demonstrate that even though it is the basic right of each and every child to get educated the youth aging out of the foster care system is generally deprived of this right. It can be said that youth residing in foster care system has to face more problems in terms of education compared to the general population residing with their biological families (Gardner, 2008).

**Residential problems.** When children age out of the foster care system, housing is one of their immediate concerns. Most of these youth have to realize the harsh reality of the massive gap between their salaries and the cost of housing. Therefore, a large number of them remain homeless.

According to a study, about one third of the youth aging out of the foster care system has lived in three different housing arrangements and about 40 percent has lived in four different housing arrangements. In addition, approximately 18 percent of the youth aging out of the foster care system have been homeless twice or more, and about half of them have been homeless more than once. It was also observed that three out of every ten homeless adults of the United States reported having been in the foster care system. It was recorded by the North West study that about 25 percent of the youth aging out of the foster care system have been homeless for at least one year during past 2.5 to 4 years (Gardner, 2008).

**Health care problems.** Health care issues are also prevalent in this segment of the youth. It has been indicated that about 25% of the youth aging out the foster care system suffer from post-traumatic stress whereas, the rate of general public suffering from post-traumatic stress is four percent. The children in foster care are generally being covered by Medicaid, but once they age out of the system they are at a risk of losing all the medical facilities. Only half of them had medical insurance and only 39 percent of these youth had dental insurance (Gardner, 2008). About one out of five of the youth aging out of the foster care system said that they have not had medical care in the previous 12-month period. Unavailability of medical insurance was the main reason for them not receiving medical care. It is evident that the youth aging out of the foster care system does not have proper access to the health care facilities, which is a significant threat to their wellbeing (Gardner, 2008).

**Unemployment.** Unemployment is a prominent problem that prevails among the youth who have aged out of the foster care system. Only 72 percent of them worked for pay and only 47 percent were employed at the time of the survey (Gardner, 2008). The survey also indicated that about 84 percent of the youth aging out of the foster care system earned less than nine dollars per hour. In addition, around 40 percent of the youth did not have sufficient amount of money to buy clothes, 20 percent were not able to pay their house rents and 22 percent had their phone services disconnected because they were not able to afford them. It was also reported that about 15 percent of the adults aging out of the foster care system remained hungry, as they were not able to afford food (Gardner, 2008).

**Physical difficulties.** Institutional or foster care has a number of negative effects on the physical and psychological development of the children (Browne, 2009). Many of the foster care institutions can be overcrowded and hence the children do not get the proper amount of nurturing, these places are not properly maintained and children have direct contact with dirt and germs, which affects their immune system (Woods, Farineau & McWey, 2013). Furthermore, the contact of children with the outside world is limited and highly supervised, which affects their development. All these conditions have a negative impact on the physical development of children. Some children can be underweight and their height is not within normal range. Moreover, many of these children also have hearing and vision problems. Most of the time, these problems are diagnosed, but not treated. Physical and learning disabilities and poor health problems may arise in children due to overcrowded atmosphere and lack of proper care and attention (Browne, 2009).

**Psychological disabilities.** Out of the 24 studies conducted regarding the social behavior of children in the foster care system, 16 studies indicated that the 94 percent of the children had negative social behavior. These children had the tendency to perform anti-social activities and had problems in interacting with people due to the limited contact with the outside world. In addition, the studies indicated that the children also have problems in developing emotional attachments. They either develop highly emotional relations or are completely detached. This could be because the children raised in the foster care system are under the supervision of an untrained caretaker and therefore, they crave for understanding, emotional attachment and affection and in some cases they are afraid of such feelings and stay away from them (Browne, 2009).

Some studies observed that the children under the foster care system had poor learning abilities and lower IQ results. The children in the foster care system also face speaking and reading problems. Studies indicated that these children have poor speaking skills, weak vocabulary and ineffective reading skills. It was, however, indicated that once these children are placed with their families they easily recovered. It must be noted that the economic status of the placement family will impact the language development and resultant academic success of the child (Browne, 2009).

### **Motivation for Foster Parents**

Some foster parents find motivation to complete the process in their own desire to fulfill the needs of foster homes in the community (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996; Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001; Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz., 2013; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006; Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2008). Some enjoy and want to help children, while others desire to provide companionship for an only child or themselves. Although some foster parents want to foster due to their inability to have biological children, other foster parents simply want to increase their family size (Anderson, 2001; Baum et al., 2001). Some foster parents are highly motivated to adopt children; others have religious reasons, and less often the desire to supplement family income (Baum et al., 2001; Colton et al., 2008). Some foster parents felt responsible to foster a relative or close family friend who would otherwise have gone in to foster care (Anderson, 2001). Anderson (2001) found that mothers who wanted to stay at home caring for biological children found a favorable alternative to working outside the home. Finally, foster parents

wanted to replace a child who had left the home or had passed away (Anderson, 2001; Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996).

Foster parents are motivated to foster for a number of intrinsic as well as extrinsic reasons. Burke and Dawson (1987) found that the need to “give back” to the community was a common motivator for foster parents. Couples who were unable to have their own children also found motivation to foster. While foster parenting can be complicated because work and family seem to interconnect, many foster parents remain motivated for several reasons, including wanting to share and use their expertise, skills, and knowledge in caring and parenting, and wanting to become parents and build a family (Schofield et al., 2013). Additionally, other parents engage in foster parenting motivated only by altruism and partly for religious reasons (Howell-Moroney, 2014). Another study showed that foster parents, especially older ones, are motivated by the desire to help make a difference in other persons’ lives, the protection of family legacy, the perseverance of their spouses, the aspiration to contribute to the growth and success of younger generations, the desire to cultivate and promote values, and the desire to contribute to society and its preservation (Metcalf & Sanders, 2012). On the part of individuals and parents engaged in kinship foster care, core motivations include having concern for their own flesh and blood, and keeping commitments or promises made to their relatives with regards to caring for the latter’s children (Hong, Algood, Chiu, & Lee, 2011).

### **Importance of Foster Parents on Foster Children Development**

The government acts as the main caregiver or parent of foster children and foster parents as secondary caretakers. No matter the good intentions of the foster care system,

foster care placement have been revealed to lead to damaging effects on the growth and development of the children.

Pecora (2012) claimed that foster care children can thrive under caring and inspirational adults who will advocate for them. The researcher also found that foster children could benefit if mental health issues, such as anxiety disorders and social phobias, are identified and dealt with early. In addition, various studies have claimed that children can benefit from foster parents and other adults who would push them on their goals, especially educational pursuits (Emerson, 2007; Golonka, 2010).

According to Pecora (2012), foster children can thrive better if they do not change placements frequently. Foster children going from one foster family to another can experience negative development, especially in their academic performance as they constantly change schools. Foster children who do not encounter disruptions on their development can form better social support networks that can help them ensure their future goals in employment and life (Pecora, 2012).

### **Challenges Faced by Foster Parents in terms of providing Safety, Wellbeing and Permanency to Foster Children**

**Role confusion and fear of attachment.** It is understood that being a foster parent to one child is a temporary arrangement. The ultimate goal is permanent placement with the biological family. Children often come with very vague time frames in which they will be staying. Psychologically, foster parents have to accept the unpredictable nature of fostering (Urquhart, 1989). Foster families struggle with uncertainties surrounding the unknowns of how long a foster child will be with them. Foster parents have a difficult time deciding how much to include or exclude the child from the family,



often fearing that if they include the child too much, the separation will be more difficult for both (Urquhart, 1989). The longer the stay of the child, the stronger the attachment becomes, and the more the anxiety surrounding the departure (Eastman, 1979). This puts great pressure on foster families who become emotionally involved, knowing that the foster children will leave (Urquhart, 1989). Consequently, some foster parents hesitate to build a strong emotional bond with the children placed in their home. The nature of fostering is having children entering and leaving the home, however, these changes are the emotionally draining, upsetting, and discouraging foster parents experience (Kaplan & Seitz, 1980). Yet, not much attention has been given to the needs of foster parents as they grieve their loss (Edelstein, 1981).

**Home life demands.** Edelstein (1981) pointed out that outsiders discounted foster parents' grief, because it is unnecessary as they bring it onto themselves. Other obstacles preventing foster parents from proper grieving are the demands of home life. Often foster parents have other children to care for, whether it be their own biological children or other foster children, in the home. The pain of foster parents is often increased when they are not able to stay in contact with the foster children they lost. Biological families sometimes prefer not to continue a relationship with the foster parents, as it can be a painful reminder of the past.

***Foster parents' reports.*** Several blogging sites on the web provide insight in the experiences of foster parents. Although it is not research data the feelings and opinions expressed by the foster parents can be regarded as an original voice of the particular parent. Jill Rippy (2015), a foster parent who keeps a blogging page, related how many people simply state that she should stop fostering. From her reaction to this statement it is

clear that she cannot simply stop fostering as she is compelled by a strong force to do so. Rippy (2015) narrated how she had to assist a fearful child having nightmares while calming her own children awoken by the screams, she stated that foster parents handle the truths that society cannot handle and they do so because they feel compelled. Although having to give up the child hurts and knowing that the child may possibly be maltreated again hurts even more, this is the harsh reality of the situation which a foster parent has to accept (Rippy, 2015). In her blog on “Foster parents do it for the money” Rippy (2015) listed some of the experiences that foster parents have to cope with and the reader soon realizes that money cannot buy that kind of dedication to a child, it must be uncompromised love. Rippy’s first-hand narration of the obstacles, high points and interpersonal sharing of joys, hopes, and failures gives a glimpse of foster parents’ lives. The unselfish love and parent-to-child sharing of life’s circumstances enabling someone to become a resilient person knowing that they are worthy of love and loving themselves is indicative of a depth of feeling for the child in foster care. People outside of this system would not understand and may as a result make hurtful remarks or be jealous of the relationship, that would however not stop foster parents to continue fostering when they have a calling to do so (Rippy, 2015; Tyler, 2016).

**Foster care system complexities.** Most of the parents want to adopt foster children as they want to have a long-term positive impact on the life of the child (Cooper, 2013). However, they are unaware of the biases and bureaucracy that prevails in the current system (Cooper, 2013; Kenny, 2016). Their effort to make the lives of the children better, makes their lives very difficult, because of regular phone calls to government agencies, visits to courts and lengthy paperwork. In addition, whenever these

foster families approach the system to get the support that they need, they are confronted with the fact that the *status quo* is not equipped with proper resources to provide them with the required support. As a result of this environment, about 40 to 60 percent of the foster families leave the foster care system within one year. This problem not only weakens the system, but it also affects the foster children who were placed with these families and who are now moved to new families.

***Foster parents' blogs.*** Jim Kenny (2016), a seasoned psychologist and foster parent, commented on the challenges foster parents have to face in dealing with traumatized children and on top of it the traumatic experience when they have to realize that the agency inherently mistrust the foster parent. Kenny (2016) stated that foster parents are treated as inn keepers and not co-responsible for the wellbeing of the foster child—a situation that hurts and causes friction between the foster parent and the agency. These feelings were confirmed by a foster parent with 15 years' foster experience, Lorraine Tyler, who stated that she felt disrespected when her opinion on the needs of the foster child she was caring for over eight months was disregarded.

**Lack of government support.** According to Eggertson, MacDonald, Baldassi and Hebert (2009), extensive and consistent harm can be inflicted on foster care children by the system. According to the DHHS (2002), an ideal foster care system is one that has adequate number of foster families who can nurture the increasing number of children being placed in foster care and have adequate resources to meet all the needs of these children who are removed from their biological families. This ideal is hardly met. The DHHS stated that foster parents are not given enough support to nurture the foster children the way they need to be nurtured. Usually, with the exception of families caring

for children in Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC) as they are usually managed by the FFA, foster parents are left to their own devices to navigate through the complicated foster care system and left to figure out how best to raise the foster children. The report showed that foster parents do not have adequate information regarding the best practices and services that can help them to serve the children in their care in the best way possible. As such, the foster care system is dependent largely on the innate competency and resources of the foster parents.

The major problem that the foster care system of United States is facing is the unavailability of skilled and professional staff. The foster care system is not able to recruit, train and retain highly skilled staff. Ninety percent of these organizations face problems in getting and retaining skilled staff. There are many factors that cause hiring problems for welfare agencies. First of all, the number of cases handled in a given time period is very high, which repels committed staff. Second, working conditions in these agencies are poor due to escalating caseloads and associated stress factors (Rochelle, 2015). In addition to that, the resignation of former employees at a high rate and the poor perception of child welfare organizations in the minds of people inhibit the recruitment process significantly (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004).

Additionally, the general public is demanding better performance from the foster care system and this demand is evident in the changes that are being made in the policies regarding adoption. As a result of these policy changes, employees of the foster care system are required to spend a lot of time doing paper work, rather than counseling, training and monitoring foster parents. Moreover, only one third of the total work force employed in the foster care system consists of socially trained people. A study also

indicated that the foster care system lacks the funds that are required for the recruitment of professional and trained staff. Proper training, support and compensation of employees can help the foster care system of the United States of America in eliminating this problem from the system (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004).

**Lack of training.** Pasztor and Wynne (1995) of the Child Welfare League of America, claimed that a competency-based in-service training program for foster parents may be in place, but this program is hardly effective and sufficient to equip the foster parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to raise the foster children well. Pasztor and Wynne (1995) stated that child welfare agencies have found time constraints lead to inadequately-trained foster parents. The lack of time leads to parents not learning the critical and specialized competences necessary to be good foster parents (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). Because of time constraints, foster parents often do not even understand how to navigate the challenging education system (Pasztor & Wayne, 1995).

Foster children, like all other children, view their caregivers as role models. Therefore, when the foster parents are self-efficient, it instills a belief that they can be resilient and successful and can work towards change and improvement despite their adverse circumstances (Schneewind, 1995).

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (2010) responded to this dilemma by creating an annually updated manual to guide foster parents in their daily activities with their foster children at home. The manual consists of information that foster parents can use to nurture their foster children, such as tips on medical care at home, the nature of foster care payments, the role of the court, and what to do with biological parents' visitation rights. However, the manual did not tackle information on

how foster parents can meet the needs of foster children comprehensively, including educational needs.

A report from the National Conference of State Legislatures (2008) claimed that foster children are supported by many individuals and agencies such as the foster parents, caseworkers, school guidance counselors, and many more. An earlier study by Altshuler (2003) also emphasized the same and claimed that many people support younger foster children, with or without the necessary skills or knowledge to serve as their advocates.

Vacca (2008) also revealed there is a dilemma regarding accountability in the arena of education and academic achievement of foster children. The reason is because, even though there are many people who support the needs of a foster child, these people in the life of the child may have fragmented relationships with one another. This can explain why the parties fail in the coordination of sharing information about the foster children (Vacca, 2008).

According to Gerber and Dicker (2006), foster care agencies should equip the foster parents with all that they need to know about their foster children, includes medical and their educational records. Gerber and Dicker claimed that the foster care system remains a complex system because foster care agencies do not equip foster parents with all the pertinent information. Foster parents should know that they can do more for their children. According to Gunter, Estes and Mintz (2007), foster parents can play greater role in making children succeed in school. Most foster children face difficulties in their academic environment, and foster parents have the ability to change this (Gunter et al., 2007).

According to Pears, Fisher, Bruce, Kim and Yoerger (2010), caregiver involvement can affect foster care children's academic adjustment during their early years. They specifically assessed the effects of inhibitory control and caregiver involvement on how maltreated children adjust in school in contrast to non-maltreated foster children. The researchers gathered data from 85 maltreated foster children and 56 non-maltreated children. The researchers focused on the children's academic and social-emotional development under their present foster circumstances. They found that there is an inverse relationship with maltreatment and academic success, such that the more that a child is maltreated, the lower his or her academic achievement. Moreover, the factor of inhibitory control facilitates this relationship. In addition, both inhibitory control as well as caregiver involvement can affect the relationship between maltreatment and social-economic competence (Pears et al., 2010). The researchers claimed that the findings show how important the role is that foster parents have in preparing the child for school and the child's subsequent academic success (Pears et al., 2010).

### **Attachment and Identity of Foster Children and Foster Parents**

One important issue with foster care or foster parenting is the attachment of foster children. This is where attachment theory comes into play. From infancy to adulthood, attachment theory can be used to explain the role of relationships on the development of an individual. The theory was developed first by Bowlby (1969) and later on by Ainsworth. According to Bowlby, newborns are especially attached to those who look after their needs and that there is a bond that can form. Bowlby claimed that it is mainly the primary caregiver that can have a significant influence on the individual's personality and character. Moreover, infancy attachment behaviors like seeking proximity to their

caregivers are especially triggered by stressful situations. Bowlby also highlighted that attachment is associated with the level of interaction and communication between the caregiver and infant. As such, attachment theory can show why early parent-child relationships are essential for further development (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969).

Attached children often use their caregivers as a solid foundation or security blanket so that they can explore on their own (Bowlby, 1988). Children who are ambivalent-insecure will seek more constant interaction with their primary caregivers. On the other hand, avoidant-insecure children hide their distress when they become separated from their caregivers, but will avoid these caregivers too once they reunite (Ainsworth, 1973). According to the theory, children who separate from their caregivers and yet are securely-attached to their caregivers are less likely to feel threatened. This holds even in a situation where the caregiver goes away, since the child understands that their caregiver will return. Ainsworth claimed that children who are securely-attached to their caregivers entrust their needs to the caregivers and understand that these needs will be met even if they are not always together. However, the downside is that if the secure child experiences having his or her needs not met, he or she will become insecure, either ambivalent-insecure or avoidant-insecure (Ainsworth, 1973). According to Ainsworth, failed emotional communication can lead to insecurity. If the caregiver cannot provide a child with constant and consistent communication, the child becomes ambivalent-insecure. When a caregiver is not available, children will adapt to the situation by not fostering emotional connection with their caregivers. According to Hazan and Shaver (1987), secure children become less hostile than insecure children. In addition, insecure children will become too hostile and rejecting of their environment (Pickover, 2002). The



theory showed that connection to birth family is critical to ego identity formation.

Attachment theory is helpful for understanding identity formation of children placed in foster care. A child in foster care can be affected by his/her personal identity and the sense of belonging to a family or community. In adolescence, those in the foster care system often have difficulty determining and showing their identity, which can affect their developmental growth.

Maltreatment in children leads to the risk of maladjustment and disturbed relationship formation with foster parents as well as later in life. The assumption is that the influence of the biological parents' maltreatment and resultant insecure attachment impairs all subsequent relationships. Joseph, O'Connor, Briskman, Maughan and Scott (2014) found the attachment patterns of the 62 adolescents they studied differed between the biological parents and foster parents. The authors further compared the attachment patterns with 50 teenagers from normal families. The foster teenagers exhibited insecure attachment with their biological mothers (90%) and fathers (100%) and in contrast nearly 50% demonstrated secure attachment with their foster mothers (46%) and fathers (49%). These results show that the negative attachment with the biological parents do not necessarily translate into negative attachment with foster parents and other attachment relationships. According to these results, maltreated children do have a significant chance of developing secure attachment with significant others in adolescence (Joseph et al., 2014).

Once taken from their birth families and placed in the foster care system, a child can lose touch with their birth culture and will lack knowledge and understanding of their culture of origin later in life (Cunneen & Libesman, 2000). The theory of attachment will

show too that kinship care is a better placement setting than non-kinship placement, because the former can reinforce the child's feeling of identity through recognition of their family histories and culture (Gibbs & Muller, 2000). Perry (2014) argued convincingly that children, who experience traumatic events before the age of three, do not recall the events in words but the neurological impressions together with feelings are stored in the brain. As a result, such traumatized children will react in a specific manner when these neurological pathways are triggered. When little children are removed from their families, placed with a foster family and relocated after a short while, these activities would make a neurological-emotional impression that may govern the child's future behavior. Various researchers have suggested that children placed in the foster care, and away from their kin or their biological parents can face additional challenges with their identity, especially if they are placed away from their community too (Barbell & Fruendlich, 2001; Schwartz, 2005). Siegel (2015) found that developmental trauma caused by relationship trauma may lead to a poor sense of self and wellbeing due to the disturbances in the child's interpersonal neurobiology. Children placed in kinship care will see themselves as relatives rather than being foster children and this recognition can affect how they develop their identity. While some children are indeed placed with loving homes, others find themselves neglected or even worse. As part of the foster care system, a child will, more than likely, not find a permanent home, but rather move from place to place regularly thus establishing no real bond with the foster parents. This contributes to a child's instability and life long view of the world. This fact of foster care also affects the parent as they too feel a loss every time a child leaves not knowing with certainty if

the system will succeed for that child. There are feelings of powerlessness as if what little good done is not facilitating a solution, but creating a vicious cycle.

***Foster parent's blogs.*** Rippy (2015) explained how painful it was to let a foster child go for whom she had been a mother for many months. Realizing that the teenager may be in possible threatening situations she would ensure that the child knows her telephone number so that she could be contacted whenever it was needed. Kenny (2016) stated in his blog that foster parents love their foster child, as attached to their foster child through a parenting bond. Tyler (2016) who adopted a family group of five children and expressed her love for these children and children in general echoes this sentiment. These experienced foster parents unequivocally express their love and devotion to the children in their care, explaining that this attachment is reciprocal as it the long-term emotional gains from the fostering situation.

### **Summary and Literature Gap**

The literature review covered a wide range of studies on the foster care system, foster children and foster parenting, revealing certain difficulties that foster parents have with the system and how this affects the development of the children. The review on the advantages and disadvantages of kinship care and non-kinship foster care showed the different outcomes that may result from the two types of placements. This creates an understanding of what problems lay in the foster care system and shows the importance of obtaining the perspectives of foster parents. The review also covers the significant roles foster parents play on the success of the foster care system, and ultimately the children placed in the foster parents' care. The studies highlighted multiple reasons why foster parents will seek to adopt or foster children they are not related to. However, even

with this abundance in literature, there is a dearth in literature as to what foster parents find problematic about the foster care system, such that there is a declining trend in the adoption of children in the foster care system and an increasing trend in children aging out of the foster care system. Few studies looked at the experiences that foster parents have with the foster care system.

The literature review clearly indicated the importance of having more foster homes in the community. However, much of the available research on the foster system focused on the experience of foster children while in foster care, but few mentioned the foster parents' perspective (Anderson, 2001; Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; Geiger et al., 2013). The majority of the studies, as highlighted in the literature review, showed the difficulties and challenges faced by the foster children in the hands of their foster parents, their peers, in schools when their "foster child" status is revealed, and in the hands of the entire foster care system. The hope is that by bringing awareness to what works best for these foster parents, it may help to establish programs that support the needs that foster parents have so that more adults will be willing to become foster parents. At the same time, the negative experiences of foster parents will shine a light on an area in which support is lacking, once again, giving agencies the opportunity to establish programs that would eliminate or reduce the negative experiences. In turn, foster parents would be more inclined to foster for periods of time that exceed the average 8 to 14 months and alleviate some of the burden of the 21% that fosters long term (Deborah & Judith, 2007). The goal is to have a better understanding of what encourages foster parents to foster for longer periods of time, which is what the current researcher is seeking to do. As the literature showed, foster parents are important for children's development, especially if they do not

change placements frequently (Pecora, 2012). The next chapter is the Methods chapter, which discusses the approaches and methodologies to be used in answering the questions raised in this study.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This study aims to qualitatively analyse foster parents' experiences in fostering children. A phenomenological approach will be utilized to investigate the phenomenon of foster parenting. This phenomenon will be investigated through qualitative interviews using open-ended questions to obtain the responses of the foster parents on their first-hand experience and perceptions of foster parenting. Qualitative data, such as interview data, will be used to identify thematic categories for the analyses in this qualitative inquiry.

The discussion in this chapter describes the research sample who will be interviewed, the information needed to address the research objectives fully, the research design overview and the applicability of the chosen research design, the data collection procedures, the data analysis procedure, the qualitative analytic software that will be used, as well as issues associated with ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the participants, and the limitations and delimitation of the methodological approach.

#### **Research Sample**

The sample will be selected in such a way that it acts as a good representative of the whole population and helps in deriving the right attitude and behavior of the entire population (Trochim, 2006). The research sample in this phenomenological study will include ten foster parents who have been fostering for at least six months and who have had a child in their home. Participants will be English speaking as the interview will be conducted in English. Participants will be a sample recruited in Ventura County. These

foster parents lived the experience of the phenomenon in question, and will take part in the interview. In qualitative studies, the sample size is purposeful and small. According to Polkinghorne (2005) a sample of 5 to 25 participants in a qualitative study is sufficient. Thus, the ten foster parents who will be interviewed are adequate. However, additional foster parents can be interviewed if the interview responses are not saturated and still distinct across each interview response. The sample of foster parents who have been fostering for at least six months and have a child in their home will be chosen as the research sample, as the researcher is also a foster parent and has access to foster parents in the country. Participants included in the study do not have disciplinary records and are licensed to foster children from ages zero to 18 years old.

Non-probability sampling approach will be used, as the research is a qualitative study. Purposive sampling will be used, as the information that to be obtained will focus on a particular group of the population and saving time, effort, and money will be ensured (Patton, 2002). Unfortunately, purposive sampling is not a probabilistic technique. The data collected from the specific sample of foster parents who have been fostering for at least six months and who have had a child in their home can unfortunately not be used to generalize about all foster parents. However, the expected results of the study would not be jeopardized by the limitations of the purposive sampling technique, as the study is qualitative and the aim is to give a thorough academic analysis of the chosen phenomenon.

As stated, the researcher has access to foster parents in the country. The researcher will take care to only select possible respondents according to the set inclusion criteria. One criterium is that the respondents will not be personally known by the researcher to

eliminate researcher bias. Respondents to be interviewed will be contacted by the researcher via e-mail or phone to request them to take part in the study. The foster parents who have been fostering for at least six months and who have had a child in their home will be contacted via e-mail or phone to briefly discuss the nature and significance of the study and invite them to participate. Those who will be contacted will be given a maximum of one month to reply to the invitation. Those who do not reply within two and three weeks of the initial invitation will be contacted by both e-mail and telephone respectively, to help drive response rate. Those foster parents willing to participate in the study should be qualified according to the inclusion criteria of the study, which are those who have been fostering for at least six months and who have had a child in their home and who speak English.

The respondents will be given an informed consent form for them to read and sign, formalizing their agreement to participate in the research study. Before the interview process starts, the informed consent will be discussed. The informed consent form is an information sheet that contains specific information of the aim of the research, guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality, and information on how the interviews will be done. This process is important to ensure that the proposed study will follow appropriate ethical principles and guidelines. After the study is concluded, the interview respondents will be provided with a copy of the results of the study (Merriam, 2009).

### **Information Needed**

Various instruments can be used to collect data. Data collection instruments include surveys, observation, interviews, existing secondary data, and many more (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2010). In this study, data will mainly be collected by



means of semi-structured interviews. In situations where the topics obtained from a specific group of respondents may present with different levels of interpretation, qualitative interviews are the best choice (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Specifically, the information will be gathered through qualitative face-to-face interviews with the option of a follow-up meeting. The information needed for this proposed study will include interview responses on the experiences of foster parents about foster parenting. The interview questionnaire will include open-ended questions to encourage participants to give broad explanations of their experience of foster. The researcher will be the interviewer and will frame the discussion in the interviews based on the prepared interview questions.

Interviews using open-ended questions will obtain non-restricted and open-ended responses (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Questions that are free from any pre-defined answer options and allow flexibility to the respondents in giving their responses are known as open-ended questions (Bynner & Stribley, 2010). The use of open-ended interview questions will provide the freedom to the participants to discuss their opinions and feelings without restraint (Patton, 2002). However, lack of a structured format for the interview responses makes the analysis of data difficult. The interview responses will be coded to generate emerging themes of responses obtained from the open-ended interview questions. The following information will be obtained from the interviews; these are the specific interview questions that will be asked:

1. Can you describe your personal experiences that may have influenced your decision to foster children?

2. In your own words, what is the most meaningful experience, if any, in fostering children?
3. How would you describe your most significant challenges when fostering children?
4. What factors keep you motivated to continue to foster?

### **Research Design Overview**

As stated, this proposed study will use a qualitative phenomenological research design as this is the best way to explore an individual's lived experiences (Russell & Stone, 2002). The phenomenon that will be investigated will be the experience of foster parenting. Phenomenology is defined by Groenewald (2004) as a study of social and psychological situations (phenomena) from the point of view of the people involved by generating descriptions of the phenomenon. Receiving an explanation of the phenomenon from the interview participants, who are all foster parents, have been fostering for at least six months, and have had a child in their home, will fulfill the research objective. The usefulness of phenomenology in the proposed study centers on the personal renditions of each individual regarding the phenomenon that is explored.

A qualitative research technique is useful for an exploratory study, while it is not suitable for explanatory research (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research design is a good method to use to simplify and manage data without destroying the context (Atieno, 2009). When the aim is to understand people's attitudes, behaviors, concerns, and motivation, a qualitative approach is more useful (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2009). Qualitative research is an also approach that is appropriate when the researcher aims to learn from the participants in a setting or how they experience things, put meanings to it

and how they interpret these experiences (Atieno, 2009). Qualitative studies are more appropriate to generate findings based on the experiences of the interview respondents, because with a quantitative method, the research would not be able to analyze results for open-ended questions. The objective of quantitative research is to examine relationships between variables through standardized numerical measures, which does not form part of this study's objective. Qualitative research is used to explore a phenomenon in-depth (Patton, 2002). High-quality research, focused on really important issues, is achieved by qualitative research. Due to the need for in-depth and varied information from the interview responses, the utilization of a qualitative method is. Moreover, qualitative research should have no bias present, as the data are all coming from the interview participants who will not be known by the researcher. One limitation with using a qualitative approach is that findings cannot be extended to a broader population unlike in quantitative approach as there is no test of statistical significance in qualitative analysis (Atieno, 2009).

### **Method of Procedure**

The proposed research is qualitative phenomenological. A phenomenological study seeks to have a greater and deeper understanding of a group of people who have lived a parallel experience. The interviews will be conducted with the foster parents during one-on-one sessions with the interviewer. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place convenient to the participant. Interviews will be conducted in ninety minutes which may extend depending on the information revealed by the participant during the interview. Interviews will be digitally recorded to ensure that visual cues like body language, facial expressions and other visual information are captured. The researcher

will keep a journal to record any observations noted during the interview as well as other information that will not be captured by the recording.

Interview questions will be semi-structured so that there will be a set of questions that will serve as a guide for the conversation while allowing the participants to express themselves. This format will also allow the researcher to do follow-up questions as needed depending on the information provided by the participant. The format of the interview will be casual and conversational to allow the participant to be at ease and not inhibit disclosure of information. The researcher will ensure that he/she remains non-directive and maintain a casual tone during the course of the interview.

### **Data Collection**

In order to identify prospective participants for the study, the researcher will personally present a letter introducing the research project to the office of children's services or social services, and soliciting help in reaching out to parents who may be willing to participate in the study. Only parents who have been fostering for at least six months will be eligible to participate in the study. Such a requirement is deemed necessary as six months is a significant enough amount of time for foster parents to have gained knowledge of issues and problems that face them as foster parents. Once there is any acceptance to participate, informed consent forms will be given to the participants to provide information on the process of confidentiality and anonymity in the study. Participants will only be allowed to undergo the interview if they provide consent by agreeing and signing the informed consent forms.

All interview respondents will remain anonymous. It will be assured that no personal information will be obtained from the interview process. Tape recordings of the

interviews will be kept safe and only the researcher will have access. A unique number representing the participants will be used to represent individual recordings and transcripts. Nowhere in tape recordings or transcripts will the names of the participants nor kids' names appear.

The data collected in the interviews will be stored in a password-protected computer and will be kept for five years. After five years, if the data are not needed, they will be deleted permanently.

### **Research Instrument**

As stated, the data will be collected by means of individual, in-person interview sessions. As interviews provide in-depth appreciation of a phenomenon based on the participants' first-hand experiences, this kind of data collection is most often used in phenomenological studies (Groenewald, 2004). The more informal atmosphere during interviews often causes better participation by respondents (Horrocks & King, 2010). Respondents will be requested to agree to a one to one and a half hour session with the researcher, with an optional follow-up meeting. The follow-up meeting will be dependent on the level of information received from each individual interviewee. Follow-up interviews with certain participants will be conducted if the initial interview responses are not in-depth. Any follow-up interviews conducted will be dependent on the willingness of the respondents.

Each interview will be audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. After the interviews, these audio recordings will be transcribed verbatim to aid in the data analysis. Audio-recordings of the interviews are more reliable than simply taking notes. For ethical reasons, participants are required to consent to audio recordings before any

recording is made. Should consent not be obtainable, thorough notes will be made. The respondents will be met at their convenience. The data collection can take place in the meeting rooms within the respondents' foster homes. It is important that the respondents should be comfortable and relaxed with the chosen interview setting. During the interview, the respondents will be given the freedom to express their personal experiences and opinions with the subject matter to obtain multiple and rich perspectives on the phenomenon investigated. The interview will be interactive to obtain in-depth responses.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Moustakas' (1994) method of phenomenological analysis will be used to analyze the interview responses in each of the open-ended questions. Moustakas' (1994) method of phenomenological analysis uses the following four steps to analyse a phenomenon, namely: Research epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meanings and essences.

The first step or phase is the research epoche. During epoche one's bias and prejudgments must be set aside to take accurate notes of the meanings that interviewees intended to convey (Moustakas, 1994). This phase is crucial as objectivity needs to be ensured. The second step is phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994), which involves comparing of the interview responses to information collected from the literature. A name or code will be assigned to every distinct idea individual respondents gave at the time of the interview.

The third step involves imaginative variation wherein similar concepts are arranged into themes (Moustakas, 1994). The codes that were identified in the responses

from the participants will be allocated to the aforementioned themes. The interview recordings will be transcribed to create themes and patterns that will address the research objectives of the study (Butin, 2010). Open coding will be conducted to create the themes and eliminate personal bias of the respondents in the interpretation of the interview. Through the process of open coding, data is analyzed to organize ideas into categories by grouping together notions that are roughly similar and fitting to the topic (Portney & Watkins, 2009). Open coding makes use of text analysis where the individual elements of language is separated and then create different categories that will group together similar words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. Selection of the different notions as identified from the interview notes and transcriptions will be guided by the research questions. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained coding as a process wherein data is broken down, analyzed, re-conceptualized, and re-grouped in a different manner to form themes and theories. After these codes are developed, it will be categorized in an abstract manner (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The final step is the synthesis of meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994). The emergent themes will be used to create an overarching narrative that spans the experience of the whole sample. An integrated summary will be drafted to relate the core of the participants' experience. The entire process necessitates the ability to "make sense" of significant amounts of seemingly unrelated data, through the grouping of data into sections or categories to create pockets of information known as themes or codes (Creswell, 2009). Codes consist of groups of phrases, concepts, or ideas used often by participants (Kvale, 2007).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The proposed phenomenological study will ensure that a consistent ethical approach will be maintained when conducting the interviews. Ethical approval will be obtained from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). This practice is essential, and required to ensure that the research methodology will be deemed ethical. Proactively obtaining the approval of the university IRB will remove doubts of ethical violation and eliminate any adverse effects to the researcher and the university's reputation, as well as eliminate risk of either physical or psychological harm to the participants.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The first limitation is the reliability and validity of the data, or the interview responses. Some of the respondents may be resistant to share their experiences on the subject matter. To minimize the impact of this limitation, the participants will be encouraged to answer honestly through the explanation that this research will be completely confidential and anonymous. In addition, the interviewer will create an environment where acceptance and empathy are communicated to the interviewees. It will be assumed that the respondents will be honest and provide accurate reflections of the phenomenon. By limiting the choice of respondents to foster parents who are not personally known by the researcher it is assumed that they will be more willing to openly share their experiences.

Second, since phenomenology is reliant on people's experiences, the meanings can change over time. Experiences are affected by many varying factors. With its nature, the experiences of one person on something today may no longer hold true for someone later on. This limits the reach of the study, as what is applicable now or at the time of the study may no longer be applicable at another point in time.



Third, there is no universal truth since experiences are varying. While there are common themes and experiences that can be categorized, there is no “one reality” in a phenomenological approach (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005). Experiences are perceived in several dimensions such as how experiences are lived in a certain time as well as interaction with other people. The truth is subjective and meanings are based on the embodied perception (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Fourth, in qualitative research, limited sample sizes are the norm due to the need for exhaustive information from respondents (Merriam, 2009). Fifth, this approach cannot be objectively proven since data is based on the experiences of the participants. Unlike using quantitative where objectivity is backed by the results of statistical analysis, qualitative approach such as phenomenology is reliant on how the researcher understands and organizes the responses from the interview. The nature of phenomenology is said to be inter-subjective. Experiences are filtered and seen through the eyes of others where meanings are created based on the interpretation of others (Wilson, 2002). The sixth limitation is the possibility of researcher bias. Bracketing is one way to overcome researcher bias. This type of interview endeavors to highlight any assumptions, bias, and beliefs that could negatively impact on the authenticity of the respondents’ answers (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004).

### **Potential Harm to Participants**

The participants reliving their experiences while doing the interview with the researcher may result in some unwanted distress or harm. During interviews and after the interview, participants may remember any trauma they encountered with fostering a child. Since questions during the interview are focused on the experience of fostering a child, any unpleasant experience/s while fostering a child will be remembered by the

participant which may cause him/her to feel the emotions that come with it. Interviews may also result in participants feeling emotional (i.e. sad) through remembering a foster child who is no longer with them. If the foster parent is/was attached to the foster child, it may pain him/her to remember the foster child that is no longer with them. Depression and/or anxiety may be triggered when participants relive their experiences with fostering a child due to a pleasant or unpleasant experience with fostering. Participants will be provided with a list of community resources that can help with such distress.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the design of the research methodology based on the research objective of the study. The population, sample size, and sampling methodology were also discussed. The last part of the chapter detailed the data collection procedure and the process of data analysis. A qualitative study involving a phenomenological research approach will be used for this proposed study using face-to-face interviews.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the additional needs of foster parents based on their experiences and perceptions so that these concerns may be forwarded to the county or state agency responsible for overseeing the local foster care system. In this study, qualitative, semi-structured interviews consisting of four open-ended questions were conducted to obtain the responses of seven foster parents regarding their first-hand experiences and perceptions of foster parenting. The overarching research question used to guide this study was: What are the lived experiences of foster parents who are navigating through, or taking part in, the foster system?

### **Demographics of the Participants**

Seven participants agreed to be interviewed for this study. Sixteen people were contacted via e-mail or phone. Ten of these responded and talked to the researcher. One did not return subsequent calls and the other two declined to be interviewed. In accordance with the inclusion criterion described in chapter 3, all participants had been fostering a child in their homes for at least six months. Additionally, all participants included in the study did not have disciplinary records and were licensed to foster children from ages zero to 18 years. All participants resided in Ventura County at time of study.

The ages of the participants ranged from 32 years to 73 years, with a mean age of 43.42 years. Years of experience as a foster parent ranged from 1.5 to 32, with a mean of 7.79. One participant was male, and six were female. Participants' annual household

incomes ranged from between \$50,001 and \$75,000 (three participants) to more than \$100,000 (two participants). Four participants were married, two were single, and one was divorced and currently in a relationship. Two participants identified as homosexual, and five identified as heterosexual. Six participants were White and one was Hispanic. Levels of education ranged from some college (two participants) to graduate school (one participant); the remaining four participants had college degrees. Three participants described their religious affiliation as Christian, one identified as Foursquare, and three reported no religious affiliation. Table 1 depicts relevant demographic information for each participant.

Table 1

Partici -pant	Gende r	Age	Relation -ship status	Educ. Level	Occupa - tion	Ethn i-city	Sexual orient a-tion	Househol d annual income range	Years foster -ing
1	Femal e	38	Single	Graduat e School	Professo r of English	Whit e	Hetero - sexual	\$75,001 - \$100,000	4
2	Femal e	33	Married	Some College	Church worker	Whit e	Hetero - sexual	>\$100,00 0	1.5
3	Femal e	73	Married	College degree	Nurse	Whit e	Hetero - sexual	\$50,001 - \$75,000	32
4	Femal e	32	Married	Some college	Stay at home parent	Whit e	Hetero - sexual	\$75,001 - \$100,000	1.5
5	Femal e	48	Married	College degree	Pastor	Whit e	Hetero - sexual	>\$100,00 0	3
6	Femal e	47	In a relation- ship	College degree	Stay at home parent	Whit e	Homo- sexual	\$50,001 - \$75,000	1.5
7	Male	33	Single	College degree	Manage -ment	Hispa -nic	Homo- sexual	\$50,001 - \$75,000	11

### Participants' Experiences of Being a Foster Parent

Participants reported that they had decided to foster for a variety of reasons, including altruistic motives and a desire to adopt. All participants described their experience of fostering as profoundly meaningful and even life-changing, citing the dramatic effect that a safe home could have on a traumatized child, their bond with the child, and the sense of purpose and accomplishment they derived from the work.

Although fostering involved significant challenges--including trauma symptoms in the children and the difficulties of dealing with a bureaucracy--all seven participants reported that they felt motivated to continue providing foster care, primarily because of the profoundly positive effects that a safe and loving home could have on a needy child.

Participants' experiences of being foster parents were influenced by a variety of supports. Participants expressed gratitude for the support they received from mentors (mentioned by three participants), training through the county (three participants), peer partners (two participants), foster parent networks (five participants), public health nurses (one participant), social workers (one participant), and organizations such as Rachel's Closet and Child's Hope Services (three participants). Although several participants reported that the number of supports for foster parents was increasing, several mentioned perceived deficiencies in the available sources of assistance, including social workers who were sometimes unresponsive due to heavy workloads (four participants) and the difficulty of finding support networks that were not overtly religious in their orientation (two participants).

### **Theme 1: Parents Decide to Foster for a Variety of Reasons**

Participants reported that they had decided to foster for a variety of reasons, but the reasons fell into two broad categories: altruistic motives, and a desire to have children or more children. Five participants reported that they had fostered for principled or altruistic reasons. The most common altruistic reason (reported by all five participants who fostered for altruistic reasons, in addition to other reasons) was a vivid perception of the need for good foster parents. One participant reported that she had decided to foster because she had grown up in a home from which she believed she should have been

removed, and she wanted to help other children who were in similar circumstances; in addition, this participant reported that her church had acquainted her with the conditions in which orphaned children often lived and encouraged her and other members of the congregation to offer assistance. Another participant reported that she had been raised in a home in which fostering and adoption were considered desirable, but were not pursued due to the number of biological children; the experience of growing up in a home in which a high value was placed on helping children and mothers in need was added to a firsthand perception of the conditions of needy children during missionary visits to Mexican orphanages.

One participant watched a televised documentary about the prevalence of attachment disorder in foster children. This information crystallized a longstanding desire to assist foster children, so the participant and her husband undertook to help very young children in order to facilitate early attachment. For another participant, living in a large metropolitan area and perceiving the need for good foster parents, coupled with awareness of the prevalence of abuse in foster homes, created a desire to provide a safe home for needy children. The fifth participant who reported altruistic reasons for fostering indicated that she had become aware of the need for good foster homes through her work with children; the availability of an extra bedroom in her house encouraged her to offer assistance.

*“My husband and I had both seen a documentary on TV about the attachment disorder that was so prevalent in the foster care system. And we wanted to do something about it. Felt that if we were able to foster babies zero to two we could possibly...teach them to attach and then be able to transfer that into their whole life...We had thought about it so long and then we saw the report and thought...we need to do this.” -Participant 5*

Two participants reported that they decided to foster because they wanted children and hoped to adopt. One of these participants already had two biological children, but had entered into a relationship with a same-sex partner with whom she also wanted to have children. The other participant who decided to foster as a step toward adoption identified as homosexual and felt that having biological children was not feasible for him. He wanted children, however, and when he found the expense of both private and international adoption prohibitive, he sought information about fostering to adopt.

*“I didn’t think I was going to foster. It all started because I wanted to become a parent and have children. I knew that I was not going to be a parent through the traditional way so I started looking into my options. Private adoptions as well as international adoptions are extremely expensive and that was kind of tossed out the door pretty early on. Then I ran into the fostering option and fostering to adopt.” -Participant 7*

Three participants reported that they had subsequently questioned their decision to foster because they had not realized in advance how challenging their role would be. These participants reported, however, that their questioning ultimately resulted in a reaffirmation of the value of fostering. The other four participants reported that they had never questioned their decision to foster.

## **Theme 2: Parents Find Fostering to Be a Life-Enhancing Experience**

All participants found fostering to be one of the most positive and meaningful experiences of their lives. All seven participants reported that the most meaningful aspect of the experience for them was providing love and stability to a needy child. Four participants described the effect on the child of finding a safe and loving home as life-changing, both for the child and for themselves, with descriptions of the effect including: “magical” (Participant 2), “huge” (Participant 5), “like a physical transition” (Participant



6), “inspiring” (Participant 6), and “nothing I have encountered has been as rewarding” (Participant 1). These participants reported that seeing severely traumatized children begin to love and trust because they had a safe and stable home affected them profoundly, and that the change in the child was tangible and dramatic. Three of the participants who reported altruistic reasons for deciding to foster reported the change in the child as the most meaningful aspect of foster parenting, and one participant who reported a desire to adopt as her reason for fostering cited this experience as the most meaningful.

Two participants reported that the most meaningful aspect of fostering for them was the sense of purpose or accomplishment it had given them. One of these participants spoke of fostering as satisfying her need to provide nurturance in a manner that gave her life meaning and purpose. Another participant spoke of the sense of accomplishment he derived from helping his foster children to succeed.

*“I was able to adopt and my children are the most meaningful thing I have ever done.” - Participant 7*

One participant reported that the most meaningful aspect of the fostering experience was having in her life the child she had ultimately adopted. This participant said that she had been the child’s parent for 29 years, and that she could not imagine her life without the young woman she had raised.

### **Theme 3: Fostering Involves Significant Challenges**

All seven participants reported that they encountered significant challenges while fostering, but all participants also said that the rewards of fostering outweighed the difficulties. Three participants reported that dealing with their foster children’s birth parents was a significant challenge. These participants found the birth parents

challenging to deal with because they were aware of the hardships the parents had inflicted on the children, and often because the encounters convinced them that the birth parents were unfit to raise the children, such that the foster parents felt anxiety about the possibility of reunification. For four participants, coping with trauma symptoms in their foster children was a significant challenge. The children suffered from abuse, neglect, and drug addiction, and the challenging effects of these adverse experiences included violent or defiant behaviors and medical fragility.

*“I think it's that I can't fix it, you know you take two steps forward and one step back. It's hard to watch that someone inflicted pain or neglect on a child, is the hardest thing-- look, a little baby, and you think how did someone inflict pain on him.” -Participant 2*

Two participants reported that the religious orientation of the foster support networks in their county had been a challenge for them. These participants reported no religious affiliation and felt that the emphasis which the available support networks placed on coping behaviors such as prayer was not useful to them. One participant reported that relinquishing foster children to their birth parents was a significant challenge. This participant reported that contact with the birth family, and access to evidence that the birth family was undergoing treatment, had in some cases made the transition easier.

All seven participants reported that they found aspects of the foster system challenging to deal with. Two participants reported that the volume of required paperwork was challenging. Four participants said that they encountered significant difficulties in trying to get information and assistance from social workers, who were often unresponsive or unavailable due to heavy workloads and high turnover.

*“...Dealing with social workers that have too much on their caseloads [to] really pay attention or hear you when you feel like the baby needs something or things need to be moving along with the bio-parent--that’s probably the most frustrating thing that I have dealt with.” -Participant 5*

One participant reported that high turnover and heavy workloads made working with caseworkers difficult; this participant reported that her foster child had had six caseworkers in 16 months. Two participants had found courts and legal requirements difficult to deal with; these participants felt that the legal emphasis on family reunification was often not in the best interest of the foster child.

#### **Theme 4: Parents Felt Strongly Motivated to Continue Fostering**

Four participants reported that their bond with one or more specific children and the effect of this bond on the children motivated them to continue with the work; the other three participants reported that awareness of the urgent need for good foster homes, and of the potential effect of such homes on needy children, motivated them to continue to foster.

*“These little ones that I hold, just looking in their faces and seeing that they are being loved. And seeing that trust begin to be built in them. That’s why we do it.” -Participant 5*

Two participants reported that they derived additional motivation to continue fostering from a sense of religious mission. One of these participants was a pastor, and she felt a profound spiritual resonance with the biblical injunction to help widows and orphans. The other participant who reported a religious motive spoke of a sense of mission. Both religiously motivated participants indicated that their sense of religious mission was not their only reason for fostering, but they felt that their faiths gave them support.

*“My husband and I are pastors and so that definitely motivates us. Even in the Bible it says to take care of the orphans and the widows. So we take that very seriously, and that’s definitely part of our motivation, taking care of those who are at the moment without mom and dad.” -Participant 5*

One participant reported that the high level of support she received from her family, her friends, and her church allowed her to foster more children than she otherwise could. All seven participants reported that seeing the life-altering effects of their care on the children motivated them to continue fostering.

## **Chapter V: The Experience of Foster Parents**

The purpose of this qualitative study of seven foster parents was to understand the needs, experiences, perceptions and concerns to inform the agency tasked with overseeing the local foster care system. The main research question in focus was: What are the lived experiences of foster parents who are navigating through or taking part in the foster system? To answer this research question, open-ended questions were discussed in semi-structured interviews: 1. Can you describe the personal experiences that may have influenced your decision to foster children? 2. In your own words, what is the most meaningful experience, if any, in fostering children? 3. How would you describe your most significant challenges when fostering children? 4. What factors keep you motivated to continue to foster? 5. In what ways do you feel supported as a foster parent? 6. In what ways do you feel you need more support or you wish you had support? 7. What programs, currently or in the past, have helped you to continue to foster? 8. Do you ever question your decision to become a foster parent, and if so, what made you question, and if not, why not?

### **Results and Implications**

Results from the current study show that participants decided to become foster parents for a variety of reasons, parents found fostering to be a life-enhancing experience, being a foster parent involves significant challenges, and parents felt incredibly motivated to continue to be a foster parent. The benefit of the current study is that it considers the perspective of the foster parent, which fills in gaps in the literature mentioned by previous researchers (Anderson, 2001; Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; Geiger et al., 2013).

Results showed there are a variety of reasons that parents decide to become foster parents, but the most common reason was for altruistic purposes and the awareness of the need for good foster parents. Also, all parents reported that being a foster parent was the most positive and meaningful experience of their lives. All parents in the current study reported a variety of challenges, the most common being handling a child who had been through traumatic experiences prior to being involved in the foster care system. Notably, all parents reported that the rewards outweighed the challenges, and parents felt motivated to continue fostering because of the bond formed with their child and because of their awareness of the great need for foster parents.

### **Reasons for Becoming a Foster Parent**

Parents reported fostering for altruistic reasons as well as just having the desire to adopt. Parents reported the positive impact that becoming a foster parent had on them, including feeling a sense of purpose and meaning. Some parents reported personal experiences such as living in an unhealthy environment themselves and wanting to help other children, recognizing the need for good homes and foster parents; this aligns with research showing that there is a need for long-term foster parents (Cherry & Orme, 2013; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Administration for Children and Families 2015; AFCARS Report, 2015). Notably, the two participants who decided to foster because they wanted to adopt were not able to have children with their partner themselves. The majority of parents did not question their decision to foster, but three participants reported that they did question fostering prior to making the decision, but then reported that their desire to foster was reinforced.

### **Fostering as a Life-Enhancing Experience**

All seven participants indicated that fostering was one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives because they were providing love and stability to a child in need. Some participants described their foster experience as magical and life-changing because they could see the dramatic, positive impact that a healthy foster environment has on the foster child which supports findings from previous research (Fisher et al., 2011). A couple of participants noted that the experience was meaningful because it gave them a great sense of purpose.

### **Challenges Faced by Foster Parents**

All seven participants reported they faced great difficulties while fostering, which supports research by Ainsworth & Hansen (2005). However, all participants also reported that the benefits outweighed the challenges. Additionally, all participants noted that the foster care system was very challenging, which supports research by Cooper (2013). For instance, there was a burdensome amount of paperwork and often social workers were too overwhelmed and not able to offer enough support to the foster parents, which also aligns with previous research (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995; Gerber & Dicker, 2006). Most participants noted having to cope with trauma symptoms in their foster children because of the experiences their children faced prior to being placed in a foster home (e.g. abuse, neglect, drug addiction, etc.) as is also evidenced by previous research (e.g., Haugaard & Hazan, 2013). A few participants noted challenges in dealing with their foster child's birth parents. For these participants, it was hard to interact with the birth parents knowing the hardships they inflicted on their child and they faced anxiety about possible reunification, which also is supported by previous research findings (Thomson &

McArthur, 2009). Lastly, two participants noted that it was challenging to work with the religious orientation of the support groups.

### **Motivation to Continue Fostering**

All participants said that their motivation to continue as foster parents resulted from seeing the life-changing effects that fostering had on their foster children. Most participants noted that a key component of their motivation to continue fostering was the bond that they formed with their foster child, aligning with research by Rippey (2015) and Tyler (2016), offering support for the idea that foster parents deeply feel for their foster child and feel compelled to continue fostering. A couple participants reported that they were motivated to continue fostering by a sense of religious mission and also noted that their faith gave them support throughout their foster experience which aligns with previous literature (Colton et al., 2008).

### **Limitations**

The current study is not without limitations. First, this study may not be generalizable to all foster parents, considering the small sample size. The sample was mostly female, white, heterosexual, and resided in the same county. Similarly, there was a large age range, and range of years that participants had been foster parents. For instance, two of the participants identified as homosexual, and those were the two participants that reported their decision to foster was based on their desire to adopt; perhaps it is more of a trend for individuals who cannot have biological children with their partner to foster to satisfy their desire to adopt, but heterosexual individuals may not see adopting as a reason to foster; individuals who can have biological children with their



partner may foster for altruistic reasons (as did those in the current study). A larger sample size, controlling for demographic-related differences would be beneficial for future studies to increase the generalizability. These participants also self-selected into the study, which implies that they may have different characteristics than individuals who did not participate in the study solely because they decided to take the time to participate and share their experiences.

Along with a limited sample size, the current study used a limited number of interview questions. Future research would benefit from examining other issues of being a foster parenting such as how they adapted when they first became a foster parent, how the foster parent bonded with the foster child, and descriptions of the process of normalizing the foster care situation for the foster child.

Another limitation is due to the qualitative nature of this study. We cannot draw any causal relationships or correlational relationships. Using quantitative measures with a larger sample could help to draw correlational relationships. Additionally, this study only looked at parents who did decide to foster. Future research would benefit by examining experiences faced by parents who chose *not* to foster. Also due to the qualitative nature of the study, there may be bias exhibited by the researcher and analyst when reviewing responses and identifying themes. For instance, the themes generated may have been influenced with how well the researcher and participant got along.

Lastly, a limitation when conducting interviews and using other self-report measures is the potential for participants to skew the truth to make themselves be perceived more favorably. This is also known as social desirability bias (e.g. Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996), and involves over-reporting positive behavior and

underreporting behaviors others would perceive as bad, therefore decreasing reliability. For example, if foster parents want others to perceive them as good parents, with potential fear of not being able to foster anymore, this could encourage foster parents to speak more positively about themselves as foster parents. This may have been especially true for the current study due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the lack of prior relationship between the researcher and the participants. In addition, social desirability is not always a conscious effort; individuals may distort their responses to be perceived more favorably without being aware that they are doing so (Pauls & Stemmler, 2003). Similarly, self-enhancement bias could explain why foster parents might describe themselves positively to increase their feelings of self-worth when it comes to their success as a parent (Krueger, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study of seven foster parents was to understand the needs, experiences, perceptions and concerns to inform the agency tasked with overseeing the local foster care system. The key focus was to identify the lived experiences of foster parents who are navigating through or taking part in the foster system. Using open-ended interview questions, the researchers were able to fill in the gaps in the literature by obtaining critical qualitative data about foster parents' experiences directly from foster parents.

Results showed that participants decided to become foster parents for a variety of reasons, parents found fostering to be a life-enhancing experience, being a foster parent involves significant challenges, and parents felt incredibly motivated to continue to be a foster parent. First, key reasons for becoming foster parents included altruistic motives,

desire to adopt and support from others. Second, participants reported that fostering was life-altering, inspiring, and left them feeling accomplished. Third, participants faced significant challenges as foster parents, including dealing with the unsupportive foster care system and the birth parents of their foster child. Lastly, despite challenges and some conflicting feelings about fostering, participants were extremely motivated to continue fostering for many reasons including the bond formed with their foster child, the recognition that foster parents are in great need, religious reasons, positive support from others around them, and witnessing the positive change occurring in their foster child's life.

The findings from the current study aligned well with previous literature in regard to the overall inspiring and positive feelings associated with fostering, and the descriptions of challenges faced by foster parents. However, the current study also added a unique qualitative component-the perception of foster care from actual foster parents. The current study indicates that fostering is overall, despite the challenges faced by both foster parent and foster child, an incredibly positive and life-altering experience for both parties involved.

The current study also implies that the experience of being a foster parent could be made more positive if the foster care system underwent some internal changes. Social workers are overburdened and unable to offer foster parents support that they need. Additionally, the foster care system could benefit from offering trainings and education regarding information on how foster parents can interact with their foster child's birth parents and how the foster parent can engage in discussion with their foster child about their birth parents, since these were both difficult areas for foster parents.

Limitations include the descriptive nature, preventing any causal claims from being made as well as use of a small sample size and limited research questions. Future research should examine the experiences of foster parents using a larger sample in a longitudinal design to examine experiences reported over time, while controlling for individual factors. Additionally, future research should examine experiences of individuals who chose *not* to become a foster parent. This could help to gain insight as to other needed improvements in foster care system and potential areas that individuals need to be more educated about and perhaps have misunderstood.



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## APPENDIX A

## Cover Letter

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Dear Sir/Dear Madam:

My name is Rodrigo Diaz and I am a doctoral student currently conducting a study on foster parenting for my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to understand the needs of foster parents, especially from children's services, based on their experiences and perceptions. The aim is to forward these concerns to the agency and to suggest ways through which the foster system and the process of fostering and adoption may be improved. In this light, I would like to request an audience with you to discuss your experiences as foster parents. As I am certain that you have a full schedule, I am willing to meet you at the time and place that is most convenient to you. The interview should not take more than one hour and a half. We can discuss the particulars through e-mail or by phone. My contact details are listed below.

Thank you for your time and patience. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Rodrigo Diaz, MA

xxxxx@xxxxxx.xxx

xxx-xxx-xxxx

## APPENDIX B

## Informed Consent Form

1. I agree to participate in an interview with Rodrigo Diaz to discuss my experiences, opinions, and perceptions regarding foster parenting.
2. The interview will take place at a time and place that is convenient to me and Rodrigo Diaz, and will take approximately an hour and a half.
3. The purpose of the study is to understand the additional needs of foster parents based on their experiences and perception such that these concerns may be forwarded to the city or state agency responsible for overseeing the local foster care system.
4. I agree to having the interview audio-recorded to aid in the analysis of data.
5. I understand that I have the following rights:
  - a. Refuse to answer questions that I deem sensitive or inappropriate.
  - b. End the interview at any point if I feel the need.
  - c. Withdraw my participation from the study at any time.
6. In order to protect my identity and anonymity, my name and other personal information that may lead to my identification will not be recorded in any of the notes of audio recordings.
7. I understand that I am not going to receive any compensation for participating in this study.

Participant's Name and Signature:

Date:

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your personal experiences that may have influenced your decision to foster children?
2. In your own words, what is the most meaningful experience, if any, in fostering children?
3. How would you describe your most significant challenges when fostering children?
4. What factors keep you motivated to continue to foster?

## APPENDIX D:

## Demographics Questioner

<b>Age</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>
_____ Years	_____ Married	___ Male	___ Heterosexual
	_____ Separated	___ Female	___ Homosexual
	_____ Divorced		___ Other: _____
	_____ In a relationship		
	_____ Single		

**Educational Background (highest completed)**

_____ Some High School	_____ Received High School Diploma
_____ Some College	_____ College Degree
	_____ Graduate School

**Occupation (List current occupation)**


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**Ethnicity (Check all that apply)**

_____ White	_____ Hispanic or Latino	_____ Black or African American
_____ Native American or American Indian	_____ Asian/ Pacific Islander	
_____ Other		

**Household Annual Income**

___ \$0-\$25,000	___ \$25,001-\$50,000	___ \$50,001-\$75,000	___ \$75,001-\$100,000
___ More than \$100,001			

**Religious Affiliation Or Preference**


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